Burning Questions and the Creative Imaginary: Our Humanities in Australian Regional Communities

Alistair Noble

'The bush', French-Australian writer Paul Wenz wrote in 1908, 'is sad'.[1] The bush people are also sad, he went on to say, 'their faces lit up by big beautiful eyes, deep, like sailors' eyes, and, like them, always looking far ahead, and then they will see things the New Chum cannot see' (Wenz 39). Writing from his farm in central NSW through the early decades of the 20th century, Wenz's novels and short stories were primarily published in Paris. As another white settler, I acknowledge that his depictions of regional Australia (and Australians) are problematic and raise useful questions for us today as either willing, unwilling, or ignorant heirs to this colonial legacy. While I may try to understand what Wenz meant by sadness, and the bush can also be terrifying if we stray into the wrong places at an inappropriate time, my experience has been fortunate. I live in a rural, regional environment surrounded by trees of great dignity. Echidnas, kangaroos, wallabies, parrots, owls, snakes, and many other friends (even once a wild koala) pass through our garden. The ancient beauty of our view across the valley towards the mountain is endlessly fascinating as the

[1] An early form of this article was given as a keynote speech on Yirrganydji Country at the Symposium 'Regions, Humanities, Wellbeing: The Relationship Between Humanities and Communities in the Regions', James Cook University, Cairns, 19 July 2024. I thank Sarah Lawrence and Adrian Walsh for constructively critiquing the draft of this written version.

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weather, sun, moon, and stars change around us, reflected in the dams below.[2] However, this extraordinary Country, maintained in careful equilibrium for tens of thousands of years by Indigenous Australians, is now alarmingly fragile and, in many respects, badly damaged.[3]

Kathryn Coff, a Yorta Yorta educator, concluded her 2021 essay 'Learning on and from Country: Teaching by Incorporating Indigenous Relational Worldviews' by posing four reflective questions for teachers:

1. How would you identify your own worldview?
2. How do you think you could include Country in your teaching?
3. How could students learn about Country?
4. How do you think as a teacher you could become an agent of change?

(Coff 200)

I have found it productive to challenge my thinking about education and the broader field of my work as an academic and manager with these questions. My worldview is that of a white, male, educated, employed person. It does not always feel like it as I work through day-to-day challenges, but I must admit that I am seeing the world from a position of relative privilege and power. I was born in Sydney but grew up in regional New South Wales and Queensland, and I currently live and work in the New England region of New South Wales (noting with discomfort this cascade of colonial labels). I want to keep posing questions to myself and others about how to make the world a better place. I am conscious—especially in a nation that remains a colonial enterprise, with a head of state on the other side of the planet—of the need to bring more Indigenous knowledge holders into my working environment to build a critical mass of influence for change.

Most importantly, I might listen to First Nations people more quietly. I received a great learning about this just recently from a Kamilaroi friend who stopped to yarn with me one day in Tamworth. I would have missed a generous and important lesson if I had been impatient or in a hurry. One valuable piece of my learning that day was an insight into how Country shapes the social behaviours of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. For white people like me, there are dangers in our being largely unaware of this in our daily lives and work.

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[2] I acknowledge the Anaiwan, Gumbaynggirr, Kamilaroi, and Dunghutti nations, which share responsibilities for the Country where I live and work. I offer my respects to the Elders of those communities, past, present, and emerging.

[3] Amid growing research and literature on this topic, Bill Gammage's award-winning book, *The Greatest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines made Australia*, remains a good starting point.

Creativity that Burns

Creative writing, performance, and visual arts practices, as subsets of the broader HASS disciplines, play a significant role in all communities. This is arguably intensified in regional and remote areas.[4] Like other art forms, poetry is, in its true function, far from mere entertainment. As Roland Barthes observed, language, like music or painting, '[…] remains full of the recollection of previous usage and is never innocent: words have a second order memory which mysteriously persists in the midst of new meanings' (16). All the creative arts are powerful and dangerous; there is a reason why autocratic governments throughout history prioritise control of the arts and artists, often at significant cost and even before doing anything else. There is a reason why, even in an Australian culture that we imagine to be relatively free, political powers are often at pains to diminish or side-line the standing of the arts in (or as) public discourse, with the double-edged sword of government funding a key instrument for the exercise of political power. While there is arguably a spectrum of oppression, the principle applies wherever power is exercised at scale. As the self-exiled Chinese artist Ai Weiwei has recently explained,

> Every form of power solidifies its foundation on absolute conditions, emphasising uniformity in thoughts, pathways, speech, and behavioural patterns. This uniformity serves as the fundamental prerequisite for the assertion of power. Contrarily, art and poetry inherently defy the pre-established restrictions of human existence, venturing into uncharted territories. They are, in essence, endeavours to construct a novel reality, constituting a potent and destructive challenge to authoritarianism. (Ai)

In music, poetry, and other arts, things can be imagined and communicated that cannot be imagined or communicated in other ways. Questions may be asked that must be asked but are otherwise silenced. Sometimes, the things that must be said and questioned are dark and disturbing as much as beautiful; in this context, for example, I have recently found myself haunted by Henry Wei Leung's book of poems, *Goddess of Democracy*, troubled musings on the tragedy of the 2014 'Umbrella Revolution' in Hong Kong. This is writing that is by turns lyrical, philosophical, historical, and polemical—but also an effortful communication where, at times, the wrenching pain rips the words from the page, leaving aching spaces where people used to be; even the dedication takes the form of an ellipsis, 'for [ ]'.

[4] Worryingly, however, regional Indigenous participation in arts industries has declined since the 2009 report *Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage: The Challenge for Australia* was tabled in the Australian Parliament. See also Creative Australia. 'The arts in regional Australia: A research summary.' 29 November 2017, <https://creative.gov.au/advocacy-and-research/regional-arts-summary/#Key-story-5>.

Democratic ideals notwithstanding, not all art is inclusive. Some forms of art are, arguably, luxury goods: expensive and, even apart from cost, inaccessible to many.[5] However, it would be a mistake to think that creative work, like education, is in any way inherently luxurious; rather than individual expression, it more often stems from a deep necessity that is profoundly collective. Moving beyond Bourdieu's suggestion in *The Field of Cultural Production* that the artist's 'position-takings arise quasi-mechanically—that is, almost independently of the agent's consciousness and wills—from the relationship between positions' (59), Ariella Aïsha Azoulay has more recently argued for a sense of art that is 'conceived as partaking in world building with others rather than the creation of discrete objects' (104). For both Bourdieu and Azoulay, the outcome is transformation—whether through 'world-building' or simply because 'every new position, in asserting itself as such, determines a displacement of the whole structure [of the field]' (Bourdieu 58). While some artistic statements might serve to reify existing social, political, and economic paradigms—especially, as Walter Benjamin warned in 1935, in an age of technological reproduction[6]—nevertheless, the possibility remains that an unexpected position-taking may disturb the framing structures of our collective experience in constructive if sometimes uncomfortable ways.[7]

In order to pass through the oppression of anxieties across all our areas of work in the humanities, arts, and social sciences, we need to figure out the crucial questions that we must ask of our time and place (from our position in the 'field')—and how best to ask them. Can we initiate a creative 'displacement', or articulate a cry for help? Who might we expect to answer? In *Introduction to Modernity* (1962), Henri Lefebvre argued that in Europe around the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the key technical, scientific, social, and political questions of the time, and the principal debates, were framed in music (268-9). This importance of music and performing arts, he believed, extended even into the early 20th century, with the radical *Ballets Russes* and the music of Stravinsky serving to amplify Russian politics in Western Europe. He proposed that without this creative work, the revolution in Russia would not have played out in the same way (105). However, things change, the ground shifts, and by the 1960s, Lefebvre was able to propose that people were feeling the weight of newly pressing questions that, as he put it, 'Stendahl would not have been able to ask' (265). Today, more than sixty years after Lefebvre wrote, what are the heavy questions bearing down on us? Many of these will be questions that he could not have asked; they may be questions that *no one but us* can ask.

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[5] As demonstrated in Bourdieu's study, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.
[6] 'All efforts to aestheticise politics culminate in one point. That point is war' (Benjamin 269).
[7] The discussion begins here with art practice, but we might justifiably extrapolate some observations about the practices of learning and teaching from this.

Some questions are fundamental and will always haunt us. Most importantly, following the analytical approach of conflict theories as illuminated by Marx, Weber, and Habermas: Who does this benefit? Who does it harm? Other questions are more specific to our times; some that Lefebvre could not have asked, for example, would be related to the problem of computer-generated text, images, and sounds. As they begin to saturate our virtual world, do we consider these to be writing, art, or music? What price, in terms of energy resources and damage to the environment, are we prepared to pay for this dubious production?[8] What does being a reader, viewer, or listener mean in such an age? Has humanity's unique talent for 'reading' (in the broadest sense), with its power and pleasures, been hijacked? Are we being hacked? Encouragingly, as Lee Worth Bailey wrote in his 2005 book, *The Enchantments of Technology*, 'There is no technical thought without enchantment because technological culture is teeming with dreams, visions, hopes, goals, expectation, and imaginative premises' (17). Current so-called 'AI' large language model technologies are a perfect case study for this, as the latest iteration of Benjamin's 'reproduction': human genius, dreams and visions, nightmares, prejudices, and stupidities are reflected to us more clearly than ever. As HASS scholars, we may at least take consolation in the fact that we have the tools and expertise to analyse such things.

Bringing the topic of technology even closer to the work of universities, we would do well to ask serious questions about many underlying systems we take for granted. While present-day technologies are extraordinary and adaptable, large public organisational entities, such as government departments and universities, generally do not make much use of this capability; instead, they buy generic products that apply technology in limited, blunted ways. For example, the alarmingly named 'learning management systems' that we use to deliver courses and, somewhat hopefully, 'engage' with students. An off-the-shelf LMS, even if thinly veneered with a particular university's branding, is a machine that structures teaching, learning, interactions, assessment, and *thinking*—we are given control over a limited set of superficial functions to fill with 'content' or 'material', but the deep frame is determined by the company that sold it. 'Form and content are one', as the composer Edgard Varèse used to say, 'take away form and there is no content' (Varèse 203-4). Think about whatever LMS your university uses; is this the best we can muster as a dynamic technology that supports and enables our dreams and visions of what Higher Education *could* be for us and our students? Does it have unintended harmful consequences? Is it worth the price we pay, as a higher education sector, to outsource this fundamentally important work to multinational tech companies and consultants? Have we made good educational

[8] Noam Chomsky et al. have observed, 'ChatGPT exhibits something like the banality of evil: plagiarism and apathy and obviation'.

design choices with this, or merely allowed ourselves and our students to be vertically integrated into an external entity's business model?

Alternative ways of teaching and learning have long been known but are rarely discussed seriously or implemented; for example, there is much of interest in the idea that gaming platforms might provide a better environment (certainly richer and more immersive) than the traditional LMS (Field). Few higher education institutions have gone so far as to create their own LMS, specifically tailored to support their particular principles of learning and teaching. One prominent example is that of Minerva University,[9] whose 'Active Learning Forum' platform, developed in 2014, was designed to support new ways of learning and teaching for high-performing students and faculty, including by minimising the need for a physical campus (Penprase and Pickus 239).[10] Our questions might also extend beyond the LMS along a spectrum from costly platforms that purport to offer students online academic 'support' towards contract cheating. These multi-national industries are the dark shadow of higher education, and deeply symbiotic. Current fears about the impact of AI on academic integrity only highlight what we have known for a very long time: our habitual methods of assessing student learning, including at higher levels of research training, are fundamentally flawed.

In a 2003 *New York Times* interview, the industrial designer Niels Diffrient asked, 'Why would you design something if it didn't improve the human condition?' (Viladas). Determining what might improve the human condition is more complicated than it sounds, of course, both laterally and longitudinally: what helps one person might harm another, or what appears to help in the short term might do long-term damage. Nevertheless, if we avoid this question in our work as designers of education and research, the risk of harming out of ignorance or complacency is extraordinarily higher. Setting actual harm aside, our work as researchers, teachers, students, and leaders, critically creative as it is, must frequently cause people (including ourselves) to feel uncomfortable. We let our communities down if we do not relentlessly question prejudices and assumptions, the 'business-as-usual'. This is necessarily a game of delicate tactics in an environment where the university's social contract seems to have been broken quite some time ago and where governments that control the higher education sector often do not like what we tell them, whether in terms of social policy,

[9] For a detailed case study of this unusual and interesting institution, see Penprase and Pickus, Chapter 10.

[10] The relationship between physical and virtual teaching spaces remains problematic in Australian higher education. While in-person, face-to-face teaching is arguably necessary or ideal for some specific parts of learning (we might easily think of examples in disciplines as diverse as music or medicine), it is also true that an educational design that entirely depends on face-to-face teaching is exclusive and discriminatory. The role of those regional universities committed to online and hybrid delivery modes is of critical national importance in addressing such inequities, not only for regional and remote students but also for intersectional urban demographic groups.

inequity, community resilience, climate change, philosophy of ethics, the critical importance of art, historical data that would inform modelling of futures, etc. Our elected representatives at all levels of government tend to fear research outcomes, both STEM and HASS. The situation is not helped by the thorny hedge of mutual mistrust cultivated between academics and executive managers within many institutions.

Nevertheless, our intellectual creativity should not stop with merely thinking outside the box—we must also imagine turning the box upside down and shaking it or setting fire to it.[11] There may even be no box at all; perhaps we have just been tricked into believing in constraints with rules set by someone else. Tyson Yunkaporta has written, 'The creative spark is a process that allows us to solve seemingly impossible problems' (113). It is time to fan that spark and pile some kindling on it.

Rewilding

In October 2014, Ian Chubb, then Australia's Chief Scientist, spoke at the National Press Club launch of a report called *Mapping the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences in Australia*, prepared by the Australian Academy of the Humanities. Chubb had sponsored the report and even partially funded it through the office of the Chief Scientist. In his speech that day, here is what this unlikely ally for HASS disciplines had to say:

> The social sciences and the humanities will underpin a creative and innovative Australia; and it is only in this context that STEM can be effective. My focus is STEM, but STEM working for and with the community, connected by trust and mutual obligation. And so I am deeply interested in the capabilities that the humanities and social sciences bring to the task. […] But I think that in Australia we tend to duck the truly hard questions. We live in the thin fog of complacency generated by the 'she'll be right' approach, or the 'no worries' motto or the 'we punch above our weight' cliché.
>
> None of them are useful. And all of them in some way suggest that we can muddle through—because we have so far. And I find that a tad alarming. The fact is, we can't be timid or lazy—in STEM, HASS, or any

[11] Pierre Boulez had a lively concept of a perpetually burning library: 'By all means let there be a library, but a library which exists only as required. It must be a "library in flames", one which is perpetually reborn from its ashes in an always elusive, unforeseeable form […] The age-old conflict between those who keep watch and those who steal, between memory and creation, burns unabated' (Boulez and Bradshaw 358).

> part of our shared enterprise. We need to evaluate, manage and take some risk. And today we need to do it all on a scale that we have never bothered with before. We need to be bold.
>
> The end we seek is a stronger Australia—a nation prepared for the very great challenges we must expect to confront. So to put it all simply, let's understand our solid foundation, work out what to do, and get better.

Bearing in mind that he was speaking ten years ago, the essential points for me in this are: there were significant challenges in 2014, and more have accumulated now;[12] STEM disciplines cannot solve the existential problems of our time without us; we must get serious and get organised; we need to know our strengths (the 'solid foundation'). Importantly, Chubb outlines a simple, practical pathway for doing this:

1. evaluate (research),
2. decide what to do (strategise),
3. act with courage and ambition.

I will add a note of caution: there is a reason why even the powerful figures in our sector, like Chubb, always talk in terms of collectives and collaborative action: they know, from hard experience, that it is often dangerous for a discipline or other isolated entity to act independently. As Ghassan Hage has said of his decades as an academic working in Australian universities, 'All I remember are governments treating the humanities and social sciences increasingly like hostile territory that they need to occupy, subdue and domesticate. But the intensity of the hostility has definitely increased' (Božić-Vrbančić 244). These umbrella terms, such as STEM, arts, humanities, and social sciences, for better or worse, do offer some protection from those prejudiced against us. The school I currently lead, like many such schools and faculties, is made up of HASS disciplines together. What I especially value in this is that it is a portfolio of disciplines ranging from the creative arts (music, theatre, writing) through to sciences (for example, physical geography), with all the other humanities, arts, and social sciences in between. This collective represents a tremendous breadth of disciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge systems and methods—many ways of thinking and knowing. It is an

[12] For example, in 2024, the higher education sector is trying to recover from the damage wrought by a Liberal/National federal government that, along with punishing the sector in general by denying support provided to other sectors managing the impact of COVID in 2020, also sought to use a massive increase of student fees in many disciplines in 2021 to supposedly 'incentivise students to make more job-relevant choices'. The present Labor government has made no move to undo this unusual and dangerous intervention in student behaviour (RMIT ABC Fact Check).

extraordinarily powerful machine for solving problems if, as a society, we want it to be. As HASS academics, we often underestimate our real strength and undervalue the social, political, and economic capital at our disposal—or, more accurately, we have been *conditioned* to underestimate and undervalue these things. Within the university as a problem-solving machine, part of our work is facilitating access to global knowledges for people in our 'region' (of which more below). At the same time, we are in a position to give multiple peoples voice, bringing local insights and knowledge into a broader discourse.

Like Chubb, many use the terms HASS and humanities interchangeably. I imagine that this is not necessarily wilful or disrespectful of the specificity of disciplinary ways of thinking and working. Rather, I think of it as a 'broad' humanities, like the concept of a 'long' Nineteenth century. It has pasts, presents, and futures—layers, height, depth, and many unexplored wild areas. Alongside the outward-facing aspects of this, there are inner correlations. In her 2020 book *Carl Gustav Jung in the Humanities*, Susan Rowland paraphrased Jung himself by saying: 'The psyche is a true wilderness of nature, where the domesticated ego is out of its natural habitat. We must learn by observation and with respect for the mysteries' (30). Let us venture into beautifully dangerous places, balancing our foundation of empirical observation with acknowledgment that what we find will surprise us all and raise further compelling questions. Of course, this is what we do best; part of our basic research training as HASS scholars, the 'solid foundation', is that we know how to manage uncertainty. Thinking of wilderness and nature brings me, via this round-about path, to the humanities in the regions and our relationships with regional communities. There are serious questions to be answered here: in particular, whose purpose are we serving? And, as previously mentioned, who are we helping? Who are we harming? After all, 'Regional Australia', like 'Higher Education', is primarily defined at a political level in the capital cities for political purposes. Do *we* have a social contract (or any kind of contract) outside the legislation governing universities? With whom? Is it still fit for purpose? If not, how would we renegotiate this?

Glyn Davis, in an essay titled 'Why are Australian Universities so Large?' published only moments after he took up the role of Secretary to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet in 2022, wrote,

> the shape of Australian universities is the consequence of federal higher education policy. […] Key variables for university strategy are controlled by Canberra—how much a university can charge domestic students, how many domestic undergraduates it can enrol, whether the borders will be open to international students. The Commonwealth directs most research funding […] the Australian public university is, above all, shaped by choices made in Canberra. (51)

Given that political ideologies have thus directly shaped the higher education sector, it follows that the way it works (or does not work) is by design. Sometimes political intent is explicit, but we can also read implicit ideology in the policy outcomes. Kylie Message-Jones has recently asked, in the context of both underfunded research collections and Australian universities, 'what message does this send about the way culture should be valued as a core part of our collective national future?'. Planned underfunding does indeed send a strong message. Michael Wesley has observed that

> We stand at the end of a generation of expansion and reform of the Australian university system. The winds of change have been driven by public aspirations and government ambitions, but also growing confusion about how universities should relate to Australian society more broadly. (197)

Much of this confusion is sown deliberately for political expediency. For example, within the Australian election cycle, major parties seemingly do not hesitate to make a plaything of international students, scapegoating them unfairly for the nation's ills while tapping into dangerous undercurrents of racism and xenophobia.[13] Meanwhile, attempted reforms of education and research bend similarly toward political theatre at the point of acting on recommendations or delivering outcomes, creating distortions that undermine positive transformation.[14]

Like everything else, the higher education sector has its lifecycles.[15] However, universities are still immensely useful as a public good, and it is essential to keep this high in our minds as we work through the present period of necessary reform and renewal. Alongside this, it would be only sensible to consider whether some of the work we need to do as '*humanitarian* humanities'[16] scholars can be done better in different contexts, perhaps with more diverse and adaptable business models and without the heavy hand of legislated regulation. Compliance with such

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[13] 'The Albanese government has turned from supporting the revival of international education […] to pulling almost every policy lever short of shutting the industry down to reduce international student numbers' (Norton).

[14] At the time of writing, the Australian government is engaged in a process intended to result in an 'accord' between universities and the government. While well-intentioned, this inevitably descends into political posturing and, ironically, discord at this point of an election cycle. It remains to be seen whether anything constructive can be salvaged from this. The ongoing failure of successive governments to implement recommendations of the 2012 Gonski Review into school funding is a sobering precedent in this respect (Wilson).

[15] Joseph Tainter, in his important yet curiously neglected article 'Problem Solving: Complexity, History, Sustainability' (2000), has outlined the transaction costs and diminishing returns at scale that afflict complex systems over time.

[16] I am indebted to Threasa Meads for drawing my attention to this pleasing terminology, which has gained some recent currency in, for example, the work of Joël Glasman.

regulation does not equate to quality, although it might serve to set practical minimum standards. Recent international research has demonstrated some of the risks:

> Accreditors, like students and employers, prefer easily recognisable degrees to reduce the risks of students being unprepared for conventional employment. So, while the gatekeeping function of accreditation ideally is to ensure quality, in some of our case studies it served to lock in outmoded and mediocre practices within academia. (Penprase and Pickus 234)

Imagining Regions

The Australian Parliament's Select Committee on Regional Development and Decentralisation, publishing its final report in 2018, noted the problem of defining regional Australia. 'The Committee is aware', they wrote,

> that different definitions and criteria are used to identify Australia's regions. These definitions are largely shaped by the purpose for which the distinction is required. For example, the purpose could be to capture data, to make policy and investment decisions, to secure funding, or to meet particular administrative needs. (House of Representatives 21)

To their credit, alongside this explicit recognition of instrumentalisation, the committee also quoted Robyn Eversole, who, in her submission to the committee's Inquiry, wrote, 'Regional Australia is a cultural imaginary' (House of Representatives 22). In such a space of imagination, our sense of what 'regional' might mean is relatively unconstrained. For example, I would recognise 'regional' as a Wongkamara Elder on Country outside of Tibooburra (celebrating their recently confirmed native title) and her cousin phoning in from Adelaide. It might refer to a Muslim community in Western Sydney or an online class I teach from Armidale—the 'virtually' regional. It might also be a discussion with colleagues in Jakarta or Taipei. We can extend these examples in interestingly intersectional ways and invoke Foucault: it may be helpful to think of these othered communities, worlds within worlds, as heterotopias.[17]

[17] Thanks to Victoria Kuttainen for reminding me of this concept in our recent discussions. Foucault described heterotopias as '[…] something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted'. He considered the colony an extreme example of heterotopia, and this is deeply embedded beneath any proposition of regional Australian types.

As a cultural imaginary, the region can move and evolve with us, yet the genuine 'problem' of regional Australia, whether instrumental, natural, or mythological, remains. In the early years of white settlement, Sydney was walled off from the rest of the continent by labyrinthine mountain ranges, a 'sandstone curtain'. This remains strangely present in the national psyche. In one sense, the regional is defined negatively as all that is not the metropolis—a dangerous binary that must be viewed with suspicion. While efforts have been made to reclaim the provincial/regional as a positive frame (Gosetti et al. 92), the regional heterotopia is also a mirror to the metropolis, revealing the warts of inequity and the scars of injustice that afflict our society as a whole. For the 7 million Australians (28 percent of population) who live in the regions, there are both advantages and disadvantages—but the disadvantages are increasingly grotesque and perverse, with access to even basic services and infrastructure like education, healthcare, and transport (let alone cultural infrastructure or 'closing the gap' for Indigenous peoples) fundamentally inadequate and unequal. This deprivation and inequity has been detailed by the Australian Government's own Institute of Health and Welfare thus:

> On average, Australians living in rural and remote areas have shorter lives, higher levels of disease and injury and poorer access to and use of health services, compared with people living in metropolitan areas. Poorer health outcomes in rural and remote areas may be due to multiple factors including lifestyle differences and a level of disadvantage related to education and employment opportunities, as well as access to health services. (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare)

These failures of public policy, with known and documented outcomes, are systemic by design; they result from conscious, informed decisions at the highest levels of government. What we complain about as 'underfunding' is actually the exercise of power. The sadness that Paul Wenz perceived in the eyes of Australians living in 'the bush' over a century ago lingers. If we, as HASS researchers and teachers, cannot address this, who will? If not now … when?

Michael Wesley, in his recent book, *Mind of the Nation: Universities in Australian Life*, said out loud some of the things we all quietly know to be true, including: 'For much of their first century, Australian universities were unashamedly places of social privilege. Founded for the purpose of training a cultivated elite to lead the colonies' (167). We should be cautious about assuming that much of that has changed. To what extent are we the beneficiaries of that social privilege? To what extent are we complicit in an ongoing colonial agenda? Are we able to be agents of progressive change? What would a real Australian university look like, as opposed to the hollowed-out shell of a colonising instrument we inherited? What will a

Deadly university look like? Wesley barely mentions regional universities in this book, except in his chapter on privilege, where he suggests that regional universities do not have it, and neither do their students (182). As a corollary, he also notes that regional universities teach a much higher percentage of the nation's lower socio-economic-status students and that the 'stratification of education advantage occurs at school level in Australia. The pattern of tertiary admissions correlates most strongly with school sector inequalities' (182-3). There is no 'level playing field', and we would be deluding ourselves if we imagined that access to university education is merit-based. Nevertheless, for those of us who believe in progressive transformation and working to reduce the entrenched inequities of Australian society, we may take heart: regional universities are, despite everything, doing *good* work in providing access to education and research across the HASS disciplines that a great many talented people would otherwise not have (supporting individual careers and quality of life, in addition to broader intellectual, social, and economic impacts).[18] These are crucial parts of our vital struggle against prejudice and inequity and to building (as Chubb proposed, optimistically) 'a stronger Australia'.

Regional perspectives and voices must be heard across all disciplines' teaching, research, and wide-ranging endeavours. While it might seem an obvious statement to some of us, a truism even, it needs to be said that diverse perspectives help us as a society understand the world better, more completely, in all its complexity. Without recognition of the significance of non-urban heterotopias, this enterprise will fail. A scholar, teacher, or artist in Mungindi, for example, has an ear to their ground and an eye to their particular window onto the world; their soundscape and viewpoint are different from anyone else's. Like Paul Wenz, I am very interested in what others can see or hear, but I cannot. Business-as-usual is not going so well for universities, regional communities, or humanity in general; fundamental rethinking is necessary. If we are to have a chance at solving the existential problems and challenges of our time, we need an expanded range of modes of thinking, new methods for solving problems, and multiple languages.

Creating Communities

In a recent article about the art of asking questions, Arnaud Chevallier and his colleagues suggested that in solving problems, it is essential to ask a well-designed *range* of questions. To this end, they discuss five categories of questions: investigative, speculative, productive, interpretive, and subjective (Chevallier et al. 72). As HASS scholars, I think we are very skilled at asking investigative, speculative, and interpretive questions, but we are possibly not always as strong

[18] For recent research on the impact of HASS/SHAPE disciplines from a UK perspective, see Wagner, Sander et al.

on the productive—the questions about how to get things done. Regarding the subjective questions, I fear that we often overlook these entirely in the context of university decision-making. This is where we might ask, for example, how does this feel? What are we afraid of? What makes us happy? It might also encompass questions such as, how does this align with our personal beliefs or spiritual experience? Do our personal and professional values integrate with those of our employer in any meaningful way? From such understandings, we might build a better capacity to plan for the emotional work that underpins everything. Many of us, I know, ask these types of questions in our research, but how often do we ask each other such things, especially in the context of planning for the future of our disciplines and universities?

In his 2022 essay, mentioned earlier, about the disproportionate size of urban Australian universities, Glyn Davis wrote, 'Some Australian universities will soon enrol 100,000 students. Such an institution will be barely recognisable as a scholarly community […]' (52). In the face of this loss of community and other fracturing difficulties we experience working in the higher education sector, including the urban/regional partition, we need to start by taking care of ourselves and each other. As all research shows, good social connections are vital to support mental health. Positive relationships, of course, are not restricted to our work environment. However, feelings of intellectual and professional isolation are catastrophic for people like us who are passionate and invested in our work. We must actively seek out like-minded people and establish positive networks. How might we put this into practice? Some modest suggestions to get started might include:

1. Take care of ourselves and our colleagues (I use this term broadly to include, for example, students and managers). In our present world, this may be a radical action and, therefore, worthwhile at both political and personal levels.[19]
2. Explore new partnerships and collaborations; do not be afraid of the unknown; look over fences (e.g., if one works in a public institution, take a look at what is happening in the private sector).
3. Get out of the office and off the campus as often as possible. Talk to people, ask questions, and listen. This should be viewed as a key part of our work and a foundation of methodology.

[19] I intend this to be differentiated from (or even oppositional to) much current discourse around organisational 'wellbeing', which tends to emphasise individual responsibility in coping with systemic problems or difficult working conditions. In their important 2023 study of this phenomenon in education systems, Saul Karnovsky and Brad Gobby have termed it 'cruel wellbeing' (249). They suggest that many managers also 'struggle against similar pressures, stresses and work conditions' as employees (262).

4. Seek out and respect allies: local, national, and international. We will sometimes find them in surprising places.
5. To move forward strategically, ask the right questions—and the appropriate range of questions—noting that we each have blind spots that can only be revealed by perspectives other than our own.

The *Mapping the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences in Australia* report is now ten years old. While other projects, such as the current Academy of the Humanities analysis of the future Humanities workforce or recent studies by organisations such as the Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities are important and useful, I am not sure that these provide us with the evidence base for the questions we need to ask now. Do we collectively have a clear picture of the 'solid foundation' Chubb referred to? Our real strengths? If not, then any moves we make are likely to be somewhat hesitant, and the impact may be accidental rather than decisive (or worse). Could we imagine a report that might fill a gap left by all the many other reports? There is undoubted value in documents that serve an advocacy purpose—speaking to government (truth to power) or engaging on an international stage, for example. However, I wonder if it is also time for something that speaks to us and our colleagues—especially younger generations, our future leaders. Rather than answering questions posed by authoritative others with metrics of *their* devising, what questions do *we* need to ask of ourselves? What evidence would *we* need to begin an analysis that might answer those questions? From this basis, we might strategise and plan toward a different kind of future—maybe even one not limited by being strapped to the dead horses of political expediency, institutional complexity, and legislative legacy.

A Big Pattern

The work we do as researchers, teachers, and creative practitioners in the humanities is critically essential for the future of this planet and all the life and beauty on it. Many public figures, politicians, and even (astonishingly) some senior university executives are in the habit of downplaying the importance of HASS disciplines and actively discouraging students from studying in these areas.[20] Yet, as everyone has known for many years, the data-based reality is that HASS disciplines lead to excellent and successful career outcomes (on par with or better than Science graduates) and make vital contributions to the national economy (RMIT ABC Fact Check). Furthermore, international studies have shown that the most valued attribute for business leaders is creativity (*Capitalizing on Complexity*

[20] Ghassan Hage suggests that 'our vice chancellors increasingly act towards us like heads of a collaborationist government in a land occupied by the enemy […] we are all collaborators' (Božić-Vrbančić 244).

34). In Australia, private sector research has shown that the most common qualification held by non-executive company directors is an arts degree (Apollo Communications). When you hear public figures talking about HASS disciplines being irrelevant or not leading to careers, keep in mind that they are lying—and they know that they are lying. This is an intentional, ideological deceit. At the same time, training students to succeed in worthwhile careers is only one aspect of our much greater intellectual enterprise, one that spans thousands of years of human thought across all continents. In Australia, along with transplanted European, Asian, American, and African knowledge systems, we are privileged to live alongside the heirs to the oldest continuous human knowledge systems and cultures. While I do not suggest that it is the role of First Nations knowledge holders to undo the damage done by colonialism, there is a broader picture in which understanding the value of such knowledge systems may yet save us all from ourselves. In saying this, I hope to avoid the pitfall of 'homely accumulation' that Ghassan Hage continues to define, a colonising exploitation of Indigenous knowledges through processes of 'domestication' (Božić-Vrbančić 240); rather, I seek a space within which alternate knowledge systems might genuinely transform our worldviews, setting an ignition-point for Yunkaporta's 'creative spark'.

Hage himself proposes that other 'modes of existence' are not only possible but co-extant with the domesticated/domesticating mode: 'we are always relating to things in a multiplicity of ways that are also a multiplicity of realities' (Božić-Vrbančić 242). Our task depends upon developing awareness of these multiplicities and fostering understanding of the possible futures that this might allow. In pursuing what is good, true, and right (if we might reclaim such words), we will find the courage to be radical, creative, questioning, critical, and constructive (bearing in mind that to fix some things, they must first be broken…). As academics, we work across many intersectional heterotopias, including discipline, university, region, and colony-nation; our communities desperately need us to seek ways to be effectively humanitarian teachers and researchers. While our day-to-day work may be focused in our areas of specialisation, the small pieces of these collective efforts add up to something vast and powerful, a pattern or design infinitely greater than the sum of us. In this, we find the reason that governments fear the transformational and progressive change that we are capable of leading, and confirmation that the best of our work is inherently a political resistance. I have great confidence in the quality and importance of our work in the HASS disciplines, despite all the obstacles thrown in our way and the political agendas that seek to discredit or undermine. Our task is to save the world together, and that is worth trying; as Tyson Yunkaporta has written,

> All the hero Ancestors are up here, sky camp, watching you, blazing that same fire again […] What would it take to free your mind, allow it to see

> these big patterns again? All the Ancestors up here, they left their traces in the earth and waters below as well, and you carry those traces within, those memories and knowledges and deep, deep love. (264-5)

ALISTAIR NOBLE is a pianist, composer, and musicologist. He is currently Head of School for Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences at the University of New England, Armidale.

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